

Heretz, Leonid. *Russia on the Eve of Modernity: Popular Religion and Traditional Culture under the Last Tsars*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2008. Notes. Bibliography. Index. ix + 265 pp. \$99 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-521-88177-7

More than thirty years ago, when this reviewer was developing an interest in traditional Russian culture, only one of the half dozen historians of Russia in her home institution was interested in peasants. He was regarded as an oddball, just as folk culture was covertly, and sometimes overtly, regarded as quaint and irrelevant. Fortunately, times have changed, and nowadays historians have become much more interested in the Russian peasants, and more specifically in their cultural attitudes. Professor Heretz takes this trend further by arguing convincingly that the traditional peasant world view continued to survive in a world of change, and hence any assessment of peasant reactions to various crises in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russia must bear this in mind. While alive to the impact of modernization and social change, he emphasizes continuities, something entirely familiar to ethnographers and folklorists. For them the most interesting aspects of this book will be the elucidation of aspects of the peasant response to specific historical and social circumstances in the period 1880-1916. As Heretz argues, “the vitality and intricacy of the empire’s civilization arose from the interaction of the dynamic principle of modernization with the more passive yet extremely resilient force of tradition” (1).

The book divides naturally into two. The first part presents a concise survey of the peasant worldview and discussions of eschatological attitudes among the Old Believers, sectarians and the peasantry as a whole. These furnish the context for the subsequent studies of peasant reaction to specific events: the assassination of Alexander II in 1881 (chapter 5), the famine and cholera outbreak of 1891-92 (chapter 6), the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-05 (chapter 7), the 1905 revolution (chapter 8) and the First World War (chapter 9). Chapter 5 establishes the key dualistic elements in peasant thinking: folk monarchism (the view of the tsar as benign father and deliverer), and the demonization of the “lord” (*barin*). As subsequent chapters show, the “lords” included not just the landowners, but also any educated group whose attitudes conflicted with their own. Attempts to bring “progress” to the peasants were therefore doomed, since those introducing the changes were seen as apostates and hence of the devil’s camp.

In Chapter 1 on the traditional worldview the author rightly points out that our view of the peasants is often based on the writings of the liberal intelligentsia who had little sympathy and understanding for a religious worldview. He takes the peasants as they saw themselves, as true Orthodox. In this way he rolls up official and popular Orthodoxy into a seamless entity, at the same time viewing the peasant worldview as essentially religious. There is much to be said for this approach in the context of the topic and period under discussion, particularly in this chapter which looks at various manifestations of apocalyptic thinking, such as chain letters, omens, portents, memorates and fabulates (here termed “contemporary legends”), as well as mistrustful reactions to facets of modernization like the railroad, science and technology. Peasants’ belief in themselves as true bearers of Orthodoxy extended to a conviction in the rightness of their worldview. In this context the maintenance of ritual observance and adherence to social and religious norms became crucial. Beyond the bounds of the book, however, the designation of their world view as religious is somewhat limiting as a tool for discussion; for example, peasant views of what constitutes a sin include offences against hygiene or social convention that have nothing to do with religion. Orthodoxy is similarly sometimes a less useful means than the reference to a magico-religious view for explaining the dichotomies in the peasant world view, whether spatial, temporal or social (for example, them/us, this world/the Other World, local/outside world, peasants/masters), even if the peasants themselves made no distinction.

The following two chapters look at minority religious groups, the Old Believers and sectarians respectively. The approach here is not to look at the attitudes of these groups in the target period (1880-1917), but to present a concise survey focusing on the evolution of key beliefs and attitudes. Professor Heretz argues convincingly that the Old Believers “act as a typology for Russian anti-modernism” (75), and that the various sectarian groups display in exaggerated form some of the deep-rooted pessimistic attitudes and ideas of the peasantry as a whole. Gloomy views of the present and the future are still characteristic of Russian peasants, as Margaret Paxson has shown in *Solovyovo. The Story of Memory in a Russian Village* [1997].

Chapter 4 on folk eschatology largely ignores beliefs about the afterlife, although the multitudinous folklore texts (religious songs, tales and *obmiraniia*, for example) on this topic show how crucial these were to the peasants in reflecting and defining moral norms and social

attitudes. Instead, the chapter focuses particularly on ideas about the end of the world as found in apocryphal texts such as the *Revelations* of Pseudo-Methodius of Patara (wrongly titled here), and *The Lord's Disputation with the Devil*. These may not have had such wide currency as texts about the afterlife, but they relate much more clearly to broader social and political developments. Modernization, it is convincingly argued, triggered fears of the end of the world.

The book is based on wide and careful, if not exhaustive, reading of published ethnographic data and commentary relating to the period and the events chosen. This breadth is not matched by reading of contemporary publications, except in history. For example, the only folklorists to receive a pat on the back are A. A. Panchenko for his 2002 study of sectarians, *Христовщина и скопчество: Фольклор и традиционная культура русских мистических сект* [The Sects of Flagellants and Castrators: The Folklore and Traditional Culture of Russian Mystical Sects. Moscow: Ob'edinennaia gumanitarnoe izdatel'stvo], and M. M. Gromyko's *Мир русской деревни* [The World of the Russian Village. Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia. 1991], a book that promotes the pro-Orthodox line of the Moscow Institute of Ethnography (23). The charitable explanation would be that much of the book was written several years ago, as may be concluded from the discussion of the flagellants (*khlysty*) and castrates (*skoptsy*). Here the author's argument concentrates on deriding now outdated approaches that focused on the possible pagan origins of their beliefs or their bizarre sexual practices. Although he footnotes Aleksandr Panchenko's key study from 2002, it does not form the basis for discussion as would be expected. Of course, Professor Heretz makes no claim to be a folklorist, but the stumbling block may be his conviction, expressed in chapter 1, that Russian folklorists are obsessed with winking out pagan survivals from Orthodox Christian and secular elements in the traditional world view (17-19). To illustrate his point he refers to B. A. Rybakov's two works of 1981 and 1987, and briefly, and somewhat more sympathetically, to N. I. Tolstoi. It is certainly the case that in the late Soviet period the dominant school in the study of Russian folklore led by Tolstoi was fascinated by pre-Christian elements in folk language, belief and ritual, but in the last decade and a half folklorists have increasingly taken into account the socio-historical context of the data. Apocalypticism has been a popular subject. One example, highly relevant to the topic of Professor Heretz's book, will suffice to make the point: E. A. Mel'nikova's article of 2004 "Эсхатологические ожидания рубежа XIX–XX веков: конца света не

будет?” [Eschatological expectations at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup>-20<sup>th</sup> centuries: Isn't the end of the world nigh?] [*Антропологический форум* 1: 250-66; translated into English as “Eschatological expectations at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: The end of the world is [not] nigh?” *Forum for Anthropology and Culture* 1: 253-70]. Not only does this article contain many useful references, both to recent publications and to ethnographic sources and commentary, but also a careful discussion of the impact on the peasants of the craze for astronomy and science among urban groups in the late nineteenth century. The author shows that while some bolder spirits became interested in astronomy and the explanation for comets, others interpreted comets according to traditional eschatological thinking.

If Professor Heretz succeeds in persuading his historical colleagues that they must take traditional cultural attitudes seriously when making their judgments, he deserves very considerable gratitude. Folklorists, whether studying Russians or another Slavic group will find the analysis of traditional attitudes in relation to specific events extremely enlightening and revealing, but may not enjoy being misrepresented.

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